

DOT/FAA/AM-99/27

Office of Aviation Medicine  
Washington, D.C. 20591

# Organizational Change: Effects of Fairness Perceptions on Cynicism

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November 1999

Final Report

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19991215 072

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1. Report No. DOT/FAA/AM-99/27	2. Government Accession No.	3. Recipient's Catalog No.	
4. Title and Subtitle Organizational Change: Effects of Fairness Perceptions on Cynicism		5. Report Date November 1999	
		6. Performing Organization Code	
7. Author(s) Thompson, R.C., Bailey, L.L., Joseph, K.M, Worley, J.A., and Williams, C.A.		8. Performing Organization Report No.	
9. Performing Organization Name and Address FAA Civil Aeromedical Institute P.O. Box 25082 Oklahoma City, OK 73125		10. Work Unit No. (TRAIS)	
		11. Contract or Grant No.	
12. Sponsoring Agency name and Address Office of Aviation Medicine Federal Aviation Administration 800 Independence Ave., S.W. Washington, DC 20591		13. Type of Report and Period Covered	
		14. Sponsoring Agency Code	
15. Supplemental Notes Work was accomplished under approved subtask AM-B-99-HRR-516			
16. Abstract <p>Organizational activities perceived by a workforce as being unfair are believed by organizational researchers to contribute to workforce cynicism. The present study examines this previously untested proposition. The results from this study suggest that fairness perceptions predict cynicism, but the strongest predictor of cynicism is organizational trust. These conclusions were derived by examining the relationship between five measures of fairness (fairness of awards, award system, work distribution, work level, and supervisors), four workplace characteristic variables (episodic stress, role overload, organizational trust, and job satisfaction), and two measures of cynicism (cynicism about change and coworker cynicism). The results show that the strongest predictor of both measures of cynicism is organizational trust. In addition, the fairness perceptions play a limited role in predicting perceptions of cynicism. Future research should better define the conceptual and empirical distinctions between workforce cynicism, organizational trust, and workplace fairness.</p>			
17. Key Words Fairness, Cynicism, Organizational Climate, Job Satisfaction, Organizational Trust		18. Distribution Statement Document is available to the public through the National Technical Information Service, Springfield, Virginia 22161	
19. Security Classif. (of this report) Unclassified	20. Security Classif. (of this page) Unclassified	21. No. of Pages 12	22. Price

## ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: EFFECTS OF FAIRNESS PERCEPTIONS ON CYNICISM

This paper investigates workforce cynicism within a division of a large federal agency. Workforce cynicism is an emerging focus for organizational researchers (Andersson, 1996; Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Bateman, Sakano, & Fujita, 1992; Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). Cynicism is typically examined in specific organizational settings, such as police departments and social service providers. In addition, one study focused on cynicism in the American workforce as a whole (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). However, little research attention is paid to cynicism in other organizations or work settings. The present study extends the range of organizations where cynicism is examined and investigates previously untested relationships among relevant organizational variables.

Research and theory regarding cynicism in organizations are still in their infancy. Due to this novelty, there is no agreed upon definition of organizational cynicism. One definition focuses on cynicism regarding organizational change. Here, cynicism is a potential barrier to change and can be defined as pessimism and hopelessness regarding innovation efforts. Specifically, Reichers, Wanous, and Austin (1997) suggest that cynicism about organizational change is a "loss of faith in the leaders of change and a response to a history of change attempts that are not entirely or clearly successful" (p. 48). A broader definition suggests organizational cynicism is "a negative attitude toward one's employing organization" (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; p. 345). The attitude model of organizational cynicism follows the traditional tripartite model of attitudes (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989). Conceptualizing cynicism as an attitude means it is a state that is more readily changeable, compared with a personality trait; it also means that an individual's level of cynicism can be changed, although it is subject to the same change process limitations as other attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1980). Support for the attitude conceptualization of cynicism is found in research showing that viewing a movie designed to increase cynicism towards American business had the

intended effect (Bateman, Sakano, & Fujita, 1992). Finally, organizational cynicism is suggested to be a broader construct, compared with job satisfaction or organizational trust (Andersson, 1996).

Job satisfaction is generally agreed to be a broad construct (Smith, 1992). However, according to Andersson (1996) the focus of job satisfaction is on the ability of a job to satisfy an individual's needs. Cynicism, on the other hand, is focused on how one reacts to objects or persons in the work environment. In addition, Andersson suggests job satisfaction is "retrospective and self-focused," while cynicism is "anticipatory and outwardly-directed" (p. 1398). Similarly, according to Andersson, trust is a belief regarding the sincerity of another's word or promise. Cynicism includes a component of mistrust, but also includes affective components (hopelessness and disillusionment). Finally, trust for a person or group may be absent due to inexperience with the person or group, whereas cynicism is generally based on past experience.

Management can inadvertently create workforce cynicism in a number of ways (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). First, workforce expectations regarding any number of issues can be raised to the point where they cannot be met, which then leads to employee frustration. Repeating the expectations-frustration cycle eventually leads to cynicism. Second, setting low expectations and creating procedures and processes that serve a policing function can also create cynicism. Finally, cynicism may result when an organization fails to restrict the unbridled self-interest of some members who engage in self-serving behavior at the expense of coworkers, subordinates, or the organization. The common thread in each of these methods of creating cynicism is the issue of fairness (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989).

Andersson (1996) suggests that distributive, procedural, and interactional injustice or unfairness serves a moderating role between a host of workplace characteristics, individual disposition factors, and the level of cynicism experienced by the employee. Similarly, other organizational researchers have examined the factors that contribute to perceptions of injustice

(Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Lind & Tyler, 1988). A question that needs to be addressed is whether day-to-day organizational events that may lead to perceptions of unfairness contribute to an employee's level of cynicism.

Andersson's (1996) model of cynicism includes a number of workplace characteristics that may affect cynicism via the moderating effects of fairness perceptions. These characteristics fall into three broad categories. The first is *business environment characteristics*. Here, high levels of executive compensation, high corporate profits, layoffs, and social irresponsibility are suggested to influence fairness perceptions. The next category is what Andersson terms *organizational characteristics*. These include poor communication, limited voice expression, discourteous treatment, managerial incompetency, and techniques of management. The final category is called *job and role characteristics*. Included here are role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload.

The present research focuses on a small number of workplace characteristics. Specifically, it is expected that role overload, episodic stress, organizational trust, and job satisfaction may predict perceptions of cynicism. Based on Andersson (1996), higher levels of role overload and episodic stress are expected to be related to cynicism perceptions. These are measures similar to Andersson's job and role category of workplace characteristics. Similarly, Kanter and Mirvis (1989) found that people who were categorized as cynical reported lower levels of trust in management and coworkers, and of satisfaction with the job and the organization. It is not clear, though, whether cynicism precedes mistrust and dissatisfaction, or whether mistrust and dissatisfaction result from cynicism. The present study does not examine the causality among these variables, but instead examines whether they are related. It is expected that job satisfaction and organizational trust will predict perceptions of cynicism. The primary focus of this study is to examine whether the strongest determinant of cynicism is fairness perceptions or workplace characteristic perceptions. To investigate this question, the relationship was examined between fairness perceptions and workplace characteristic measures as they relate to organizational cynicism. The strongest predictors of cynicism were expected to be some subset of the fairness measures.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedures

During the course of an on-going organizational change, employees of a division within a large federal agency were asked to volunteer for group administrations of an organizational survey over the course of a week. Of the division's 125 employees, 120 completed the survey (14 management and 106 non-management). A proctor provided instructions and answered respondent questions. The proctor also provided assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Employees completed the survey during normal working hours.

### Measures

All measures in the current study were responded to on a 7-point, Likert-type scale. Response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The items comprising each measure can be found in the Appendix.

Two measures of cynicism were used. First, "cynicism about change" examined the respondent's self-reported degree of cynicism regarding the efficacy of changes being made in the organization. "Coworker cynicism" assessed the respondents' self-reported perceptions of the degree of cynicism among their coworkers. These measures were identified based on factor analysis of the larger survey. Some of the original items that comprise these measures were adapted from Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983). The researchers added additional items to meet the needs of the division where the research was conducted.

Five measures of fairness were administered. The foci of the measures were based, in part, on fairness issues identified during employee focus groups conducted by the researchers. "Awards fairness" assessed the perceived fairness of the rewards that were distributed for exceeding the organization's performance standard. "Awards system fairness" assessed the perceived degree of fairness in the procedures used to determine and distribute rewards for exceeding the work standard. "Work distribution fairness" assessed perceptions of fairness regarding the system used to distribute work tasks. "Work level fairness" assessed the degree to which respondents perceived equity in the amount of work that was expected from the

workforce. Finally, "supervisory fairness" assessed perceptions of interactional fairness with the respondents' immediate supervisor. Information from the literature and the employee focus groups was used to construct the first four fairness measures. The items that comprise the supervisory fairness measure were adapted from Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983).

The workplace characteristics included measures of "episodic stress," "role overload," "organizational trust," and "job satisfaction." The measures were included to determine if these organizational characteristics were predictors of cynicism and to provide a competing set of predictors for the fairness measures. All of these measures, except for episodic stress, were adapted from Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983). The episodic stress measure was developed specifically for the current study.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the study's measures, along with internal consistency reliability estimates and intercorrelations, are shown in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, most of the measures had alphas of .70 or greater, except for coworker cynicism (alpha=.63), and both awards system and work level fairness (alphas=.65). The level of cynicism about change found in the present study is similar to that reported elsewhere (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). Here, 45% of respondents agreed with statements indicating cynicism about change, compared with 43% of hourly employees found by Reichers et al. Similarly, Kanter and Mirvis found that 34 to 48% of white-collar employees were categorized as cynical.

On the second cynicism measure in the present study, perceptions of coworker cynicism were reported by 27% of the division-level workforce. It should be noted that other research has not examined perceptions of coworker cynicism, and therefore comparison figures for other workforce groups are not available. Finally, the level of positive job satisfaction reported by this division-level workforce (80%) was somewhat higher than that of the larger organization (71%) and of other Federal agencies in general (Thompson et al., 1999).

Table 1 also shows that most of the fairness measures were moderately intercorrelated, except for perceptions of supervisory fairness. Perceptions of awards

system fairness was the only fairness measure that was significantly correlated with supervisory fairness. Perceptions of cynicism about change and reported coworker cynicism were also moderately correlated. Finally, Table 1 shows a large correlation between perceptions of episodic stress and role overload, as well as a large correlation between organizational trust and job satisfaction. In addition, these two sets of measures were moderately and negatively intercorrelated.

Hierarchical statistical regression (Cohen & Cohen, 1983) was used to examine the relationships among the study variables and the two measures of cynicism. For each measure of cynicism, the set of fairness measures was first entered into the equation. In the next step, the set of workplace characteristics measures was entered into the equation. The results for cynicism about change are summarized in Table 2, and the results for coworker cynicism are summarized in Table 3.

In predicting cynicism about change, Table 2 shows that when only the fairness measures were entered into the equation, awards system fairness and supervisory fairness were significant predictors. However, work distribution fairness perceptions approached significance,  $t(112) = 1.962$ ,  $p < .052$ . At this step, the overall model was also significant,  $F(5,112) = 8.93$ ,  $p < .001$ . The model accounted for 23% of the variance in cynicism about change. In the next step, the workplace characteristics measures were entered into the equation. Again, the overall regression model was significant,  $F(9,108) = 13.05$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the model accounted for nearly 60% of the variance in cynicism about change. However, the two statistically significant fairness measures that previously predicted cynicism about change dropped out of the equation, and work level fairness perception entered. Table 2 shows that the other fairness measures did not approach significance. Instead, the results suggest that organizational trust and job satisfaction were the primary predictors of cynicism about change. Overall, the results of this analysis suggest that, when considered alone, several fairness perceptions were related to cynicism about change. However, when considered in conjunction with workplace characteristics, organizational trust and job satisfaction were the strongest predictors of cynicism about change, and fairness perceptions played a minimal role.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Estimates, and Intercorrelations for Study Variables.**

Variables	Descriptive Statistics			Intercorrelations <sup>1</sup> and Reliabilities <sup>2</sup>										
	Mean	S.D.	n	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Cynicism about Change	4.23	1.29	118	(.85)	.419	.270	.424	.301	.148	.330	-.363	-.256	.685	.622
2. Coworker Cynicism	3.33	1.08	118	.419	(.63)	.237	.205	.452	.198	.213	-.299	-.359	.558	.316
3. Awards Fairness	4.06	1.32	119	.270	.237	(.81)	.518	.363	.432	.078	-.360	-.500	.298	.289
4. Awards System Fairness	4.40	1.17	119	.424	.205	.518	(.65)	.316	.279	.216	-.263	-.455	.378	.350
5. Work Distribution Fairness	3.30	1.15	118	.301	.452	.363	.316	(.70)	.307	.143	-.330	-.404	.366	.246
6. Work Level Fairness	4.03	1.34	118	.148	.198	.432	.279	.307	(.65)	.175	-.237	-.392	.286	.345
7. Supervisory Fairness	4.70	1.57	119	.330	.213	.078	.216	.143	.175	(.96)	-.312	-.181	.431	.189
8. Episodic Stress	5.16	1.30	119	-.363	-.299	-.360	-.263	-.330	-.237	-.312	(.85)	.568	-.490	-.289
9. Role Overload	3.92	1.13	118	-.256	-.359	-.500	-.455	-.404	-.392	-.181	.568	(.70)	-.384	-.290
10. Organizational Trust	3.61	1.32	119	.685	.558	.298	.378	.366	.286	.431	-.490	-.384	(.74)	.566
11. Job Satisfaction	5.50	1.29	118	.622	.316	.289	.350	.246	.345	.189	-.289	-.290	.566	(.80)

<sup>1</sup> Correlations greater than .195 are significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>2</sup> Reliability estimates (alphas) are on the diagonal instead of 1's.



**Table 2.** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Cynicism About Change.

Hierarchical Step	Predictor Variables entered into model in each step	$\hat{B}$	$\beta$	$t$	Model $R^2$	Model $\Delta R^2$
1						
	Awards Fairness	.037	.039	.360		
	Awards System Fairness	.304	.278	2.729*		
	Work Distribution Fairness	.205	.181	1.962		
	Work Level Fairness	.071	-.075	-.782		
	Supervisory Fairness	.174	.216	2.480*	.227	.227*
2						
	Awards Fairness	.007	.008	.093		
	Awards System Fairness	.127	.116	1.492		
	Work Distribution Fairness	.055	.048	.683		
	Work Level Fairness	-.164	-.172	-2.372*		
	Supervisory Fairness	.018	.022	.324		
	Episodic Stress	.005	.005	.066		
	Role Overload	.150	.128	1.893		
	Organizational Trust	.515	.518	5.909*		
	Job Satisfaction	.263	.267	3.269*	.597	.370*

Note: \* indicates  $t$  and  $\Delta R^2$  are significant at  $p. < .05$ .

**Table 3.** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Coworker Cynicism.

Hierarchical Step	Predictor Variables entered into model in each step	$\hat{B}$	$\beta$	$t$	Model $R^2$	Model $\Delta R^2$
1						
	Awards Fairness	.043	.052	.447		
	Awards System Fairness	-.032	-.034	-.326		
	Work Distribution Fairness	.401	.414	4.419*		
	Work Level Fairness	-.001	-.008	-.082		
	Supervisory Fairness	.072	.106	1.197	.201	.201*
2						
	Awards Fairness	-.004	-.005	-.050		
	Awards System Fairness	-.128	-.137	-1.460		
	Work Distribution Fairness	.311	.321	3.770*		
	Work Level Fairness	-.040	-.050	-.567		
	Supervisory Fairness	-.042	-.062	-.736		
	Episodic Stress	.060	.070	.753		
	Role Overload	-.137	-.137	-1.668		
	Organizational Trust	.495	.584	5.504*		
	Job Satisfaction	.035	.004	.042	.409	.208*

Note: \* indicates  $t$  and  $\Delta R^2$  are significant at  $p. < .05$ .



Table 3 shows that similar results are found when predicting perceptions of coworker cynicism. In the first step of the analysis, only fairness measures were used to predict coworker cynicism. The overall regression model was significant,  $F(5,112) = 5.621$ ,  $p < .001$ . The only fairness measure found to be a significant predictor was work distribution fairness. Overall, the model accounted for 20% of the variance in coworker cynicism. The workplace characteristics measures were entered into the equation in the next step. Again, the overall regression model was significant,  $F(9,108) = 6.50$ ,  $p < .001$ . Overall, the model accounted for 41% of the variance in coworker cynicism. Here, organizational trust was again a significant predictor, and work distribution fairness was retained in the model.

## DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrates that employee cynicism is related to some perceptions of fairness in the workplace, confirming the relationship suggested by a number of researchers (Andersson, 1996; Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). Specifically, the results suggest that lower fairness perceptions regarding the level and distribution of work contribute to the various aspects of employee cynicism examined here.

Although additional fairness measures predicted cynicism about change when workplace characteristics were not considered, organizational trust was the strongest overall predictor of both cynicism about change and coworker cynicism. The strong relationship between cynicism measures and organizational trust is not surprising, confirming expectations stated by Kanter and Mirvis (1989). These authors suggest that cynicism will be higher in companies where trust in management is low. This finding does, however, call into question the assertion by Andersson (1996) that cynicism is a broader construct compared with organizational trust. The high correlation and strong predictive effect of organizational trust on the cynicism measures suggests, at least for this division-level workforce, that the two constructs are highly related. It may be more fruitful to consider the cause and effect relationship between these two constructs instead of focusing on the broadness or narrowness of the construct definitions. Unfortunately, the causal

relationships among these constructs cannot be examined here due to the cross-sectional nature of the present study.

Understanding the antecedents and consequences of workforce cynicism about change will aid organizations in better managing organizational transitions and transformations. In addition, such understanding will help organizations better manage the quality of work life of the workforce. However, before this research is conducted, the results of the present study suggest it is necessary to better define the conceptual and empirical distinctions between workforce cynicism and organizational trust. One possibility is to examine organizations where some employees are low in trust but are not cynical. Different reactions to organizational proposals, such as change, would be expected for these groups. Moreover, longitudinal research should investigate the causal relationship between organizational fairness and cynicism. Perhaps cynicism occurs following a series of organizational events. For example, initial cynicism may result from a number of perceived injustices over time or the organization repeatedly failing to meet the employees' expectations. These events, in turn, may lead to dissatisfaction and mistrust, which, eventually, may become more general cynicism regarding the organization.

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## APPENDIX A<sup>1</sup>

### CYNICISM ABOUT CHANGE

- r When changes are made in this organization, the employees usually lose out in the end.  
Most changes lead to improvements in the way we work.
- r It's really not possible to change things around here.
- r Changes here always seem to create more problems than they solve.  
I think that changes in this organization tend to work well.  
My coworkers are encouraged to develop and try new ways of doing things.

### COWORKER CYNICISM

- r "We've always done it that way" and "we tried that before and it didn't work" are typical responses from my coworkers to new ideas or suggestions.  
My coworkers readily adjust to technological changes.
- r Changes in [this division] are met with apprehension and suspicion.  
Good ideas are implemented quickly by my coworkers.

### AWARDS FAIRNESS

- Considering how hard I work, the awards I earn are fair.  
The rules used to determine awards are fair.  
I can exceed the standard if I want.  
The awards I can earn are worth the effort.  
Everyone has the same opportunity to earn awards.
- r Compared to me, other people earn awards with less effort.

### AWARDS SYSTEM FAIRNESS

- r Earning awards requires too much effort.
- r When it comes to earning awards, getting along with the supervisor is what really matters.
- r Performance expectations are too high.
- r There is favoritism in the way the awards system is managed.

### WORK DISTRIBUTION FAIRNESS

- r Some employees ignore the rules for assigning work.
- r I would change the way work is distributed if I could.
- r Some people repeatedly get easier work assignments.

### WORK LEVEL FAIRNESS

- The rules for distributing work are applied equally to everyone.  
On average, the amount of work I receive is fair.  
Everyone's work has the same level of complexity.

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<sup>1</sup> An "r" preceding an item indicates reverse scoring of the item.

## APPENDIX A (Continued)<sup>1</sup>

### SUPERVISORY FAIRNESS

- My immediate supervisor ...
- .. keeps subordinates informed.
  - .. is always fair with subordinates.
  - .. keeps informed about the way subordinates think and feel about things.
  - .. helps subordinates develop their skills.
  - .. has the respect of subordinates.
  - .. deals well with subordinates.
- r .. tends to play favorites.

### EPISODIC STRESS

- I work under a great deal of tension.  
Problems associated with my job have kept me awake.  
I have felt fidgety or nervous as a result of my job  
I often feel mentally drained at the end of my workday.  
I often feel physically drained at the end of my workday.  
[this division] is a stressful place to work.

### ROLE OVERLOAD

- I have too much work to do everything well.  
I never seem to have enough time to get everything done.
- r The amount of work I am asked to do is fair.
- r I can handle the number of different activities that I must perform during the course of a day.

### ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST

- r [This division] will take advantage of you if you give it a chance.  
When the management of [this division] says something, you really can believe it's true.  
I feel I can trust the people at [this division].
- r People at [this division] will do anything behind your back.

### JOB SATISFACTION

- All in all, I am satisfied with my job.  
In general, I like working here.
- r In general, I don't like my job.

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<sup>1</sup> An "r" preceding an item indicates reverse scoring of the item.